

DR. ROBERT MOORE

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

ARTS CONFERENCE

Gander, Newfoundland

March 18, 1993

Not just in Newfoundland but in the whole world we are living in a state of "inbetweenity". That is to say our lives are in a parenthesis between two historical eras. One of them is dying but its devotees procrastinate over performing the last rites. The other one is in the pains of birth but its welcomers can't find the right midwife.

All people living in a condition of "inbetweenity" do one of three things: either they rearrange the furniture of the status quo, hoping that by giving weight to different pieces the turbulence will go away. Or they take a strictly linear view of life, projecting current trends (mostly those they approve of) into the future and striking their plans accordingly; or they see the enveloping uncertainties as a challenge to their imagination and their will and proceed to use both

to give a desirable shape to the surging, raw energies of the new era.

Course number 1 - rearranging the furniture of the status quo (like altering the seating plans on the Titanic) is simply a recipe for anxiety, the best definition of which is "solving today's problems with yesterday's tools." People who do that tend to become one of or all of the three calamitous F's: frenetic, fanatic and fundamentalist, attempting to abolish the future in the name of the past.

Course number 2 is the joy of the analytical temperament - with its linear view of reality. The purely rational mind finds its vindication in extrapolating present trends into the future and so minimising risks with what seems a flexible preparedness. People of this ilk live by juggling several projected scenarios which are meant to give them the assurance of continued comfort and profit.

Fine, if the text of current history merely keeps adding new chapters to itself. But a succession of signals has been telling us not about new chapters but about a whole new text to be written. Or to put it another way, we cannot simply enlarge the lens through which we see the world. We have to change the lens altogether.

Lester Pearson, that sage Prime Minister of Canada, said some thirty years ago with classic Canadian understatement "government is the administration of surprise". I am pretty sure that if he were here today, he would emend the statement to read " our time is a continuum

of surprises." Which is another way of saying that the future is not predictable. Predictable, no; inventable, yes.

So as we live in this time between times what we require is the faculty of vision. Ah, yes, Vision. A word that makes the blood run cold in some people's veins (remember President Bush dismissing it as the "vision thing"?) and is overworked to death by others. In fact it is so misused that it is in danger of currency devaluation. We have got to save it from platitude death: that is, becoming the mortal remains a departed truth.

Let us be clear about it: vision is not projection. Vision is creation. It is not a matter of following a line. It is a matter of weaving many lines, some entirely new, some quite old into patterns not seen before. In short, it's the ability to construct in our imagination an alternative reality, a world that is not yet but can be. It may be for our island, for our country, for our region and, yes, for our planet.

Such an alternative reality is really an architecture of symbols radiating values which do not presently prevail; suggesting institutions that do not now exist: requiring attitudes and behaviour patterns not currently accepted. People healthily possessed of a vision are, by the same token, convinced, that the present ways of seeing things and doing things lead to entropy. What their vision offers, they believe, is a livable and viable future with

tremendous releases of human energy.

We cannot have a vision of a different mode of being and doing without symbols. They are the paintings we make of what does not yet exist. And like good paintings they are not static. The more we live with a healthy symbol the deeper becomes its meaning, the broader its scope, the more it reveals about our society and our times.

Equally important, the symbols that make a vision possible grip not only our heads but our hearts as well. That is why they empower and energise us to break out of conventional molds and create new contexts for living. To recognise the umbilical between symbols and new contexts of living is also to recognise the importance of the arts in education. For symbols, I need hardly say, are the very being of the arts. The more our youth engage in them and enjoy them the more they will recognise how encompassing is the role of symbols in their lives.

For it is not only when we envision futures that we use symbols. We use them every day of our lives. We have to: our daily existence would be meaningless without them. Reality is so enveloping, there are so many things coming to us relentlessly from all directions, that unless we select some of those things (which means leaving out others), connect them to one another and fuse them into a cluster of symbols we would be totally lost. Symbols help to situate us in the present as well as enabling us to create the future.

How ? By combining accessibility and immensity. A symbol can be very ordinary and matter of fact at one level and yet signify a whole sweep of human possibilities at another. Or it can be a gripping metaphor arresting to the eye, irresistible to the psyche inducing a new level of consciousness.

Let us look at an example. Certainly one of the great symbolists of the 20th century was Mahatma Gandhi. Great not only because he used symbols so tellingly in the making of history, but because he taught others to do the same. When he picked the simple spinning wheel as his symbol for Indian development, he well knew that it radiated meanings that were not so simple.

First, the spinning wheel stood for what later was called "appropriate technology." That is technology within the reach and the means of poor villagers enabling them to become masters of their own destinies rather than helots to the elites. Second, what the spinning wheel denoted, productive autonomy, would validate the small farmers in their own eyes as self-reliant and indispensable contributors to India's economy. Third, it would give the villagers the sense of continuity in change and change in continuity so necessary in a culture where past and future must be fused. Finally, in a fundamentally caste ridden society the spinning wheel would be the emblem of common human dignity and therefore a revolutionary symbol without revolutionary alarums.

In short Gandhi took an ancient contraption that spelled backwardness and transformed it into a symbol with an immensity of meaning and profound implications for Indian society.

But he had another symbol which was less concrete and yet at the same time just as compelling. He kept reminding the Indian villagers that within each of them there burnt the fire of divinity and that meant power: creative, cleansing, generating. For a people who hitherto saw themselves as fate ridden, possessing nothing to make a difference to the world around them, this was a liberating experience: they did have the stuff that turns history around. So they confidently endured British beatings and jail sentences becoming more independent in spirit and more adamant that their country be independent too.

A moment ago I linked the idea of inventing the future with the concept of vision. The latter is mother to the former; vision being not the ability to see what is coming and prepare for it, but the capacity to envisage what we wish to materialise and create it. As I say this I remember what one of my old school masters used to tell me: "there are three kinds of people in the world, those who watch things happen, those who make things happen and those who say: my goodness, what happened?". Visionaries, as opposed to pipe-dreamers, belong to the category of those who make things happen .

To talk about inventing the future seems at first sight an extraordinary, almost bizarre, statement. After all we have been

accustomed to see ourselves as responding to it. But that is because we have been nurtured on the "Doctrine of Progress" which obliged us to believe that history knew where it was going and we either had to go with the flow or be left forlornly stranded on "the bank of the disposables." Most of us now, especially since the end of the cold war and the massive threat to the planet's life support systems the human species has mounted, would say we are not sure that the drum beat of history is programmed in advance.

We are beginning to realize that there are things called future grooves. That is a whole range of possible alternatives any of which could be brought into being if there is the political will to do so. That word "political" is extremely important here because it is the key to understanding why we should seek to induce our young people to become PRACTICAL visionaries.

A practical visionary is the very opposite of someone who conjures up a vision without also seeking the means and the steps to fulfill it. A practical visionary is someone who, having created a vision, or been seized by one, communicates it to others effectively thereby creating a constituency dedicated to fleshing it. He or she recognises the need to forge alliances with groups moving in the same general direction. Planning strategically, acting tactically, matching means to ends and understanding the value of timing are all part of the process.

In short, being a visionary is not being a spacious escapist. It means handling the very scruff of reality and it requires a sense of the play of politics. Not just party politics but the politics of local communities, of municipalities, and of intermediate levels of government, and increasingly in this globalized world the politics that go beyond nation-states.

Vision and political behaviour go hand in hand, if politics is defined as the use of persuasion, influence, strategy and power to bring things into being. Wherever we are and whatever we do, politics is inescapable. If I may misquote the New Testament and "wherever there are two or three gathered together there is politics in the midst of them."

Nurturing practical visionaries has to be one of the prime vocations of our schools whether they are in Newfoundland or any other part of Canada. If history is not so much presented to us as invented by us and those best at inventing are best at envisioning possible futures then our schools must encourage our young people to say "what if". But not just to say that but to think of ways to turn the "what if" into the "what".

It goes without saying that all science fiction is based on the idea of "what if". The science fiction writers asked themselves : "What if we can could land on the moon, what if we could observe Mars at close

range from our spaceships, what if we were able to probe the outer limits of our solar system with our technology" and their stories flowed from those conjectures. When finally the technology matched the political will and the political will matched the dream then science fiction began to turn into science fact and as a species we were no longer earth bound. No wonder the motto of the Epcot Centre in Disneyland reads: "if we can dream it we can do it".

That, epigrammatically, makes the most telling case for the arts and the sciences and technology to mutually reinforce one another in education. Yes, the arts nurture the capacity of our young people to dream meaningfully, to envision futures and to create in their imaginations potential alternatives to the present. But to flesh their visions, to go from the what if to the how, they need the sciences and technology as well as a sense of history and of political process. We can sum up the situation this way: science and technology without the arts can lead young people to the cult of power without wisdom; the arts without science and technology can lead them to the cult of visions without know-how.

One of the most fertile soils for the growth of the temperament that does not fear change but actually initiates it is the sense of wonder. And one of the ingredients of the sense of wonder is a fascination with the interconnectedness of phenomena, between the natural, the social and the ideational. A prime function of the arts is to reveal

connections that we normally miss or make connections that we normally regard as inconceivable. By the same token, good education should always have as one of its aims "making the obvious wondrous and the wondrous examinable" and in that it is a reflection of what the arts do.

That was my motto when I taught some thirty years ago at a high school in pre-independence Guyana. To help my students stand back and look at their own society with new eyes I fashioned a course entitled "Guyanese society observed through Greek mythology". The course turned out to be a kindling combination of fun and discovery. Apart from the respect the students acquired for myths as repositories of wisdom, they began to diagnose the veiled power relationships in Guyanese society since a lot of Greek mythology is about power and how it is used. Most fundamentally, by bringing together two entities - Guyana and Greek myth - that seemed to have nothing in common the course helped the teenagers realise something of the immense and intricate web of human reflectiveness.

I knew that we had struck oil when the students at the end of the course began to say that they were amazed at the complexity of their own small society (population less than a million) and equally amazed that myths so old could be so useful.

Literature, drama, painting, music and dance and film help us to do what the astronauts did when they landed on the moon. You remember

they looked back at the earth and saw it in an entirely new perspective: as a blue-green, tiny ball, fragile; a thing of unity with no visible ideological frontiers. The picture they took became a symbol for many movements particularly those aimed at peace and environmental sanity. The arts usually do the same for us. They give us a "moon view" of ourselves and our societies, frequently to shock us out of, sometimes to gently lead us away from, complacency and the cramping of the spirit.

I am sure that many of us, at least those over 40, remember Barbara Ward, incontestably one of the great prophets of the 20th century. An incandescent environmentalist with a Christian sense of history she married the two in persuasive and scintillating prose and was a co-founder of the 1972 Stockholm Environmental Conference. There is a magnificent passage she wrote for a Papal Commission in 1971 that is even more relevant now than when she wrote it. This is what she said:

"The most important change that people can make is to change their way of looking at the world. We can change our studies, we can change our jobs, we can change our neighborhoods, we can even change our countries or our continents and still remain much as we are. But change our fundamental angle of vision and everything changes, priorities, values, judgments, persons. And then she added since she was writing it for the Pope: "Again and again, in the history of religion this total upheaval in the imagination has marked the beginning of

a new life. St. Paul struck blind on the road to Damascus, St. Augustine converted to Christianity by his mother's prays, St. Francis of Assisi stripping off his rich clothes all experienced a turning of the heart by which men see with new eyes, understand with new minds and turn their energies to new ways of living".

What Barbara Ward referred to as "seeing with new eyes, understanding with new minds" is the same as re-interpreting the world through a change of symbols and therefore changing the meanings that we give to things. St. Paul was an excellent case in point: the psychological trauma that blinded him was a symptom of his turning away from old symbols. When he recovered his inner sight (saw things with new eyes) he fused the Greek idea of the gods becoming human with the Jewish idea of the human Messiah bringing peace and justice to earth and focused the fusion on Jesus of Nazareth, thereby giving Christianity its unique appeal in the Roman Empire.

Francis of Assisi's tearing off his rich clothes was also seeing the world with new eyes. It was a no longer a "top-down" world but a "bottom-up" one where the poor counted for more than the rich. It was also a world where humans and animals and natural phenomena were all colleagues in a community of creation. Hence " brother sun", "sister earth" and "brother wolf".

Let us apply all this to our schools. In school situations where the arts are fully integrated into the curriculum and where the motto is not "art is art and science is science and never the twain shall meet", our young people will learn to stand back and look at science and technology in perspective, never taking them for granted, never making them masters of the human species.

But they will also learn to stand back and look at their social relations, the structures of their society, how they do business, how they make a living, even how they amuse ^{themselves} with critical eyes stimulated to do so both by the arts and by subjects like history and sociology. A modern philosopher once remarked: "if you ask fish how good is the water they live in they will reply 'what water?'". Without an exposure to the arts in a curriculum whose individual disciplines are porous to one another our youth are in danger of taking the fish's approach to their society and its workings.

Many of you may have read the "Passage to India" especially after seeing the film of that name. E.M.Foster who wrote that novel describes one of his characters in another story as "standing at a peculiar angle to the universe." (In passing may I say that I have seen many such characters in Newfoundland.) "Standing at a peculiar angle to the universe" is precisely what an education which integrates the arts and the sciences is supposed to help our young people to do. For it means having access to an observation post that gives us a "different angle of vision" when conventional things start falling apart. If we rob

young people of that access we severely handicap their capacity to be creative not just artistically but technologically, institutionally, entrepreneurially as well.

Let me give you a story from my line of work about the power of drama in the lives of very poor Third World women. About 20 years ago, a group of women in a rural area of Jamaica seeking a way to break out of the trap of poverty and helplessness approached female anthropologist for advice.

Wisely, she counselled them to examine their condition through play-acting, the plays being their own creations. Wisely, because Jamaicans, like all West Indians, take to theatre like birds take to the air, their rich and splendid oral tradition lending itself easily to dramatic expression. With her expert help the women ventured into participatory theatre and as the plays acquired strength and shape they focussed with relentless clarity on different aspects of the women's powerlessness.

The result was an upsurge of consciousness among the women about the way power was denied them, used against them, by whom, and the disguises employed to prevent them from realising it. They came to see their menfolk in an entirely new, and not often flattering, light. They began to understand how power is gained, how its holders can be challenged, how to exert pressure where it counts upon politicians and public officials. They learnt the value of community solidarity and

how to organise communities for action. Most telling of all they recognised the power that lay in networking with like minded communities across the island and they set about doing it.

The network they created is called "Sistren" (the feminine of "Brethren"). The movement has become an enduring feature of Jamaican society, providing poor women with needed and productive skills and educating them on using their strength. Its spokeswomen have been invited to the United States and Canada to share the lessons learnt with social activists on this continent. Women in other Third World societies are applying its methodologies to their own situations.

For our discourse it is a fine example of the power of one of the arts to bring people to self-discovery, to empowerment, to getting a perspective on their society that makes the scales fall from their eyes, and to actively seeking to take their society in new directions.

Getting a perspective on society that is not the prescribed one often means changing the established meanings of words or coining new ones. Particularly in these days it means exploding those slick, oily euphemisms that mask constraining and debilitating realities. Stalin, that feline master of 20th century brainwashing , understood with his accustomed perspicacious brutality the supreme value to his regime of monopolising the definition of words. He once remarked that the secret of his hold over the Soviet people was not the Red Army but his control of the dictionary.

Stalin's words have a wider application than the old Soviet regime. Even democratic societies may fall into the condition of allowing small groups of groups of people, especially media celebrities, to fix their horizons by fixing the meanings of words. But a period of historical inbetweenity is no time to have horizons frozen by having words that arrest the vision of their users. An education in which literature, drama and the oral tradition stand proudly, and fertilisingly, in the curriculum will enable our young people to liberate their potential by creating opportunities to express it precisely because it helps them recognise the power of words to ignite creativity -- or to stymie it. Sistren keeps us focused on that truth.

Let us look at another example, this time from Bangladesh and the theme is banking. The sacred principle of all banks is: lend money only to those who have collateral. Hence between banks and the poor there has been a great gulf fixed. And then some 17 years ago there came a Bangladeshi economist, a man of imagination and sensitivity who was troubled by the wastage of human talent among rural women of his country, their entrepreneurial gifts unexpressed for lack of loans to get them going.

Spurred on by a satirist's picture of the over-extended rich being accommodated with yet more loans and the deserving poor not being accommodated at all (he that hath to him shall be loaned and she that

hath not shall be denied the little that she asks) his intuitive mind hit on a new principle of bank loans incorporated in the Grameen Bank. It's fundamental assumption: the poor need loans more than the rich and there should be a bank that recognises this. The principle: collateral does not have to be money: it can be people. In other words the collateral of the poor can be other poor.

How ? By turning the sisterhoods traditional among the poor rural women of Bangladesh to this end. The bank loans are made to one member of a sisterhood at a time, with the proviso that only when her repayment is fully made will a second member get her loan and so on. Naturally peer pressure to repay is high. So too is peer cooperation to ensure that their colleagues' little enterprises take off. The Bank's success has ben astonishing. It lends currently over US \$20 million a month and enjoys a recovery rate of nearly 97% and it serves over one and a half million landless people. Formerly destitute borrowers have increased their incomes by more than 50%.

What is important for our purposes is that the Grameen Bank is a product of the creative imagination. The founder took a conventional idea - collateral as property - and stood it on its head - collateral as people. This is precisely the stuff of which the arts are made: looking at the conventional in unconventional ways.

An amusing and, for that very reason, revealing example of standing a conventional relationship on its head lies in the following quotation

written originally, not by a vocational writer, by a teenager. It came in a school essay on the motor car.

"One day very recently, a visitor arrived from Mars. He came to Europe. He also visited Canada and the United States. This is what he noticed. He noticed there was a metallic object which is called sometimes an automobile and sometimes a car. The car has a slave attached to it. The slave is human. He visitor from Mars noticed that every morning the slave gets up very early and takes the automobile to a restaurant to feed it, then the slave drives the car to a club where the car can enjoy the friendship and companionship of many other cars, whilst the slave goes into a building to work very hard to support this car.

Then six or seven hours later out comes the car slave, gets into the car, takes it home and puts it to bed. The car slave has to have a good night's sleep so as to get up the next day to take the car back to the club and then earn money to support it and keep it happy. On the sixth and seventh days which is what the humans call weekends the car is taken out to view the beauties of the country side and then taken back home to start the cycle again".

A good teacher could work wonders with a passage like that - on several levels. It is a fine instance of the power of humour to jolt our perceptions without raising our hackles. The upturning of the relationship between car and human can open the door to fruitful class

discussions on how far the car is a help or hindrance in modern life, particularly city life. During those discussions the positive and negative aspects of the consumer life-style in North America will undoubtedly surface.

In the hands of a skilful teacher, or better, a group of skilful teachers, the domination of our culture by the car can lead on to discussions about air pollution in our cities. That, in turn, feeds straight into the cult of technology at the expense of the life support systems of our planet and the whole issue of the search for a technology for sustainability. All of which will take the young people back to looking at public and private transportation compatible with the healthy survival of the earth.

The activities that drama, literature, painting, dance, music give rise to nurture the left side of the brain. Very important at all times but particularly so when the received wisdoms are no longer adequate for the problems we have to face. At such times our intuitions are of paramount value for they make leaps, (which the strictly analytical mind does not do) and those leaps can become the basis of whole new systems of thought and proceeding.

Saying that in no way belittles the importance of the right side of the brain. The aim should be to develop both sides of the brain in our students so that they evolve into well rounded persons, very useful to

their societies because they marry diagnosis to creativity. But there will always be those whose left side is immensely more powerful than the right and vice versa. The aim of our classroom activities should be to first, to get the rightsiders and the leftsiders to recognise their need of each other and second, to get them accustomed to working together. For if they do not come to regard that as normal at school they will find it all but impossible to do it later on.

Someone summed up the effect the arts have on us this way: they make us see what hardly anybody sees and they make us dare to think what hardly anybody else thinks about what everybody sees. Like all aphorisms there is a bit of overstatement in it but its kernel carries an important truth. The story of the little boy at the emperor's court who, alone of all the throng of courtiers, noticed that the emperor had appeared with no clothes (brilliantly narrated by Danny Kaye in one of his films) is a delightful commentary on the first part of the aphorism. That boy must have gone on to be a writer or painter for he had what it takes: the ability to see beyond and behind what the prevailing order teaches one to see and the audacity to say it for all to hear.

Charles Dickens' lived almost a century before that aphorism was coined but his writings bear witness to its essential truth. The poor and the exploited working class were largely invisible to the middle and upper classes of mid-Victorian Britain. In Dickens' novels they came alive, despite all the cruel indignities and crushing burdens heaped upon them, as people, in all their colorful variety. People

who did not deserve either not to be seen or seen only to be dismissed. Historians consider that in making his middle class readers actually "see" the working class and the poor Dickens contributed to the spirit of reform which suffused British society in the last quarter of the 19th century.

Perhaps the most well known illustration of seeing what hardly anybody else sees and daring to think what nobody else thinks about what everybody sees comes from the story of Exodus in the Old Testament. Remember that when Moses first encountered Yahweh he was convinced that the Pharaoh's power was unshakable and that the Hebrew people had no alternative but to be helots to their Egyptian overlords. Then God, speaking from a burning bush which is not consumed (the symbol of the inexhaustible imagination) makes Moses see what no other person, Hebrew or Egyptian, sees: the Pharonic system is susceptible to astute political pressure if applied with a sense of timing.

The Hebrew people found the idea at first inconceivable, then impossible, then possible but not practicable. It was Moses' particular skill to move them along the road to daring to think what he thought about what they had finally come to see. That is, that if they played their political cards right they would be permitted to leave Egypt - which they did by the skin of their teeth.

Everything we read about Moses tells us that he was a superb political

leader because he combined the talents of a strategist with the imagination of an artist. Put it another way, the left side and the right side of his brain worked symbiotically. According to the story, Moses lived at a time of acute crises in Egypt, symbolised by recurrent plagues. He saw those crises as a signal that new thinking and acting were called for, and behaved accordingly.

If good education is the evolution of consciousness to higher levels then the arts are as indispensable as the sciences. For consciousness implies more than just know-how. It means an ability to approach phenomena as wholes rather than stripped down parts and to understand that those wholes are themselves strands of immense webs that make up our world. It also means using whatever human faculties best helps us to appreciate the intricate interconnections between things and that the whole person, not just the rational faculties, is engaged in that appreciation.

When we talk of entering a new era we usually mean learning to live and think in new paradigms. A paradigm shift is a fundamental change in our angle of vision made necessary by the fact that the old paradigm was blown apart by too many contradictions entering our line of vision. To refuse to change would be like King Canute who sat on his throne on the seashore and commanded the rising tide to stop till he was nearly drowned.

Our best artists whether in literature, drama, painting music and film

have been warning us for some time now that our age was running out of steam and that we must be prepared for fundamental changes. And they have been teaching us by their example not just how to see what many did not want to see but how to think in new modes in order to start creating ways of living and ways of perceiving that would ensure our survival with dignity.

The generation now in schools will be the ones to work out the implications of the new paradigm for their professions, their businesses, their vocations, their life-styles and even their recreations. To equip them to do all of that their creativity and sensitivity will be as necessary as their technology. No education worthy of the name will treat the arts as esoteric cousins to the sciences, delightful but marginal. If it does it will merit the epitaph:

The tragedy of this system was not its death
but what it allowed to die in its wards
when it was alive.